DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 368 507 PS 022 328

TITLE	Assessment in Early Childhood Education: Status of the Issue. A SERVE Research Brief.
INSTITUTION	SERVE: SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	[91]
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Criterion Referenced Tests; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Assessment; *Evaluation Criteria; High Risk Students; Informal Assessment; Learning Problems; *School Readiness Tests; Screening Tests; *Standardized Tests; Test Content; *Test Interpretation; *Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS	Gesell School Readiness Test

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of testing in early childhood is to identify children who may be at risk for learning problems so they may be placed in appropriate educational environments. Testing is popular because educators take at face value the claim by test developers that using standardized test instruments to classify, retain, or promote children is supported by research, and, in fact, readiness assessments have been predictive of school success. It is argued, however, that standardized testing has been both overused and misinterpreted. The most frequent abuse of developmental screening results is from using tests that have no established reliability and validity, resulting in children who need special services being overlooked, children being mislabeled as at-risk, and misdirected resources. Often, readiness tests are substituted for screening tests and have been used to predict child performance in subsequent grade levels even though they were not designed for that purpose. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that the most important consideration in evaluating and using standardized tests is utility. Staff must be trained to recognize what specific tests can and cannot measure, and how they can be used to improve educational services. A path-referenced approach has been suggested to improve assessment because it places the child's performance in a position along a path of development. Also recommended is an assessment system that can be used cooperatively by parents and teachers. An ongoing evaluation process would consist of three measures: criterion-referenced checklists, portfolio collections of child's work, and summative teacher report forms. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 368 507

A SERVE RESEARCH BRIEF

Assessment in Early Childhood Education: Status of the Issue

Tests serve many purposes in education. They can:

- be used to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum, teachers, and educational systems (Nickerson, 1989),
- aid in curriculum planning, guide instruction, and establish qualifications for teachers, and
- establish criteria for classification, retention, and promotion of students.

The practice of administering standardized tests to young children has increased dramatically in recent years (NAEYC position statement, 1988). This trend is attributed in part to the increased academic emphasis of the kindergarten curriculum and demands for accountability (Meisels, 1989).

The Purposes of Testing in Early Childhood Education

The primary purpose of testing in early childhood is to identify children who may be at risk for learning problems so they may be placed in appropriate educational environments (Meisels, 1987). To do this, screening and readiness tests are used. Developmental screening tests identify children potentially in need of special education services (Meisels, 1986;1987). These tests display a child's ability or potential to acquire skills. They are typically norm- (group-) referenced. Readiness tests focus on a child's relative preparedness for benefiting from a specific pre-academic program or curriculum (Meisels, 1986;1987) and measure current achievement, performance, and general knowledge levels. Such tests best describe the child's entry characteristics (Meisels, 1987) and are typically criterion- (specific skill-) referenced and are designed to facilitate curriculum planning. One widely used example is the Gesell School Readiness Test.

Why is Testing so Popular?

Educators take at face value the claim by developers that using standardized test instruments to classify, retain, or promote children is supported by research (Shepard & Smith, 1988; Meisels, 1989). Furthermore, although there is criticism of the findings, (Meisels, 1987) Gesell readiness assessments *have* been predictive of school success (Gesell, 1987). One study established a positive relation between predictions for kindergarten readiness and school performance in the 6th grade (Ames & Ilg, 1964). Another found that developmental age was a more effective predictor of success or failure in kindergarten than chronological age (Wood, Powell, & Knight, 1984). School districts throughout the country also report informally of

PS 022328

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

positive correlations between achievement, school adjustment, discipline patterns, parental and teacher satisfaction, child self-concept, and retention rates, and the use of the Gesell Screening Test and developmental placement (Gesell, 1987).

The Limitations of Testing

It is argued that standardized testing has been both overused and misinterpreted (NAEYC position statement, 1988) resulting in mediocrity rather than excellence in education. Over reliance on test scores has resulted in teachers adopting inappropriate teaching practices and admission and retention policies that are sometimes not in the best interests of children (NAEYC position statement, 1988).

The most frequent abuse of developmental screening results from using tests that have no established reliability and validity (Meisels, 1987). This has resulted in children who need special services being overlooked, children being mislabeled as at risk, and misdirected resources (Meisels, 1987). Often, readiness tests are substituted for screening tests and have been used to predict child performance in subsequent grade levels even though they were not designed for that purpose. Because they say little about potential, (Meisels, 1986) these tests are most appropriately used by teachers in making initial curriculum decisions about individual children (Meisels, 1987).

Another concern expressed about readiness tests is that they tend to identify a disproportionate number of poor and minority children as unready (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Thus the tests can hold children out of school and deny access to public education to those who need it most (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Often, children who fail readiness tests are identified as inadequate. This shifts blame onto the child rather than onto the test, the curriculum, the instruction, or the school system (Shepard & Smith, 1988). Finally, standardized tests tend to emphasize recall knowledge and provide little indication of the level at which children understand subject matter or the quality of their thinking (Nickerson, 1989).

Recommendations

NAEYC believes that the most important consideration in evaluating and using standardized tests is utility. The purpose of the test must be to improve services for children. Tests should be avoided when their validity is doubtful (NAEYC Position Statement, 1988).

Staff must be trained to recognize what specific tests can and cannot measure and how they can be used to improve educational services for children (Judy, 1986).

A path-referenced approach has been suggested to improve assessment because it places the child's performance on a position along a path of development (Bergan, 1991). Consisting of assessment instruments, planning tools and learning activities that emphasize social competence and higher order thinking skills (Bergan, 1991) , this approach

- assesses children's abilities, not just their performance on specific test items.
- traces the development of capabilities over a period of time.

- provides information that can be used cooperatively by parents and teachers to plan developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that continue to promote children's growth.

Meisels (1991) recommends an assessment system that also establishes an ongoing evaluation process rather than one that takes a snapshot of academic skills. Consisting of three measures, this approach includes:

- criterion-referenced checklists that indicate student strengths and weaknesses across several categories of performance and behavior, including gross and fine motor skills, expressive and receptive language, reasoning and cognition, and socio-emotional development.

- portfolio collections of the child's work compiled by teachers and children and shared with parents and future teachers so they can see patterns in development and identify potential problem areas

- summative teacher report forms summarizing the checklists and portfolios. The reports are based on teacher observations and shared with all those concerned with educational progress of the child (Meisels, 1991).